

[Sunday Afternoon at Mrs. Gerbati's]

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SUNDAY AFTERNOON AT MRS. GERBATI'S

The Sunday afternoon session at Mrs. Gerbati's was in full swing. In the kitchen the talking was mostly in Italian. The old grandmother who sat in the corner by the stove spoke nothing else. Her face was deeply wrinkled, her eyes dull, and her shawled shoulders were thin and bent under the weight of years. She was untroubled by the confusion and din, withdrawn far into memory or oblivion. And no one paid her any attention.

Mrs. Gerbati, the old lady's daughter, was a vigorous buxom woman, deep-breasted and strong-limbed. Middle age had not grayed her sleek black hair or dulled the flash of her black eyes. Now she was busy pouring drinks to answer the raucous orders from the inner rooms. Her own daughters, darkly handsome and well-formed, hurried about serving the drinks — ale, beer, red wine, grappa, whisky. Rough masculine voices joked and jibed at the two young girls, but they parried the thrusts with sharp tongues and good-natured sarcasm. There was no coarse language, no vulgarity, and no male hands were groping... Mrs. Gerbati's was a respectable place, her daughters were nice girls. If anyone got fresh there he did not remain long. Mrs. Gerbati aroused was a formidable figure; and the girls were quite able to take care of themselves. [???

The long table in the dining room was crowded with men, Italians, Swedes, Yankees, Scotsmen, elbow to elbow. Laughter resounded from the walls. From the parlor came

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the music of 2 a piano and the roar of singing voices. A Dartmouth graduate was playing; the singers included two stonecutters, a saloon-keeper, a lawyer, a dentist, a service station worker, an insurance agent, a town loafer. There were no barriers of caste in Mrs. Gerbati's where good drinking men from all walks of life gathered in defiance of the Sunday Blue Laws. All nationalities and all fields were represented.

The old grandmother and her husband had come to Barre with the first of the Italian immigrants. He was already well-experienced and skilled in cutting stone. But he did not live long in this country. The enclosed sheds were not like the open-air sheds in Italy. The dust was worse and ten years of intensive working in it killed him. By then the daughter had grown to full-blown womanhood and married another stonecutter, Rodrigo Gerbati, a sturdy sensible young man from their native province of Siena.

They were happy and prosperous. Gerbati did not waste money as so many did. They took care of the old lady, bought this fine large house, and raised two daughters. But the fear was in the old grandmother, and Mrs. Gerbati caught it when her husband began to cough. A terrible sound, that coughing.

I wasn't afraid until then, said Mrs. Gerbati. Not even when my mother talked and warned and shook her head. And he wasn't either, I know he wasn't. Until that coughing started and kept getting worse. One day I said it was too bad we didn't have a son. My mother said at least the girls wouldn't 3 have to cut stone. And Rodrigo nodded his head after thinking a long way off, and he said: "That is right." Then I knew.

I thought that big strike might save him, you know. That was 1921 or '22. Rodrigo didn't go back to work after that. But it was too late... I think he got hurt too one night when they had a fight. He never told me anything about it, but he came home that night with marks on his face and hands and his clothes torn. After that he seemed worse, the cough was worse, and the life had gone out of him, he wasn't the same man.

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The girls were still young when he went, just babies really, not old enough to understand. We had this house all paid for and a little money left, not much. I was still young myself, I could have married again... But I didn't want to. There was no other man for me, I guess. The Nonna used to tell me to take another man. She said don't be a fool, you're young and pretty and healthy, you got two girls to bring up. Don't be a fool and waste your life. Your blood is still warm and there is room in a young heart for another man. You need a man, she told me... But I didn't want one. After him there wasn't one, that's all. So I never married.

But I had to do something. The money was running out, the girls needed more things as they got older, there was taxes to pay and all that. I had to do something... My mother didn't like it when first I took stonecutters in to room and board. She said it was disgraceful. Then when I 4 started selling liquor she almost died. She said she'd rather die than see that. Now she don't care any more about anything, she's too old.

At first I just sold to the men who stayed here, you see. Just a few drinks with their meals, you know, maybe a few in the evening. Then they started bringing in a few friends for drinks. It was all quiet and decent. They were good men, some of them had worked with Rodrigo, been his friends. They were good to the girls, to all of us. But naturally more and more kept coming, you know how it is. Their friends brought other friends and I sold more drinks. Pretty quick it got to be quite a business.

They come for Italian food too, parties that order in advance. I am a good cook if I do say it. Everybody knows my cooking. Some say my ravioli and spaghetti is the best in Barre, and they rave about my minestrone and my antipasto... But it's not been too easy, it has made a lot of hard work for me. Anyway it keeps me from thinking too much about — things...

I had to do it. I had to take care of my mother and I put the girls through high school. Now they both work outside when they can and that helps too. One of them is in the Five-and-

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Ten, Woolworth's. now. The other waits on table some in a restaurant. They're good girls, nice girls. They were brought up that way, just like I was.

No, I am not ashamed of it. I have worked hard and always kept a respectable place. It was something I had to do 5 and I'd do it again. I get tired and nervous sometimes. Today they are noisy here, and a little drunk. But you don't see any trouble, do you? No bad talk, no fights, nothing out of the way. They know I wouldn't stand for it, and they know my girls wouldn't stand for any funny business around them. Not those girls.

I am not ashamed of it one bit. You say I shouldn't be, I should be proud of it? Well, I guess maybe I am, maybe I am proud of it... I didn't like to say it myself but I am proud.